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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

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TAGS: PTER PREL PGOV KDEM LE SY

SUBJECT: WITH GOL APPROVAL OF TRIBUNAL, ARE MARCH 14 AND MARCH 8-AOUN HEADED FOR SHOWDOWN?

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (S) We have heard from March 14 figures that Fouad Siniora plans to use the emotionally charged date of December 12 -- the one-year anniversary of the assassination of MP and al-Nahar publisher Gibran Tueni -- to convene the cabinet to approve the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. If current plans are followed (a far from certain proposition, given unstable conditions), the cabinet meeting would be held either immediately before or after a memorial mass for Tueni, as the gathered March 14 masses would serve as a human shield to allow cabinet ministers to meet. The danger is that the cabinet meeting hall and the Greek Orthodox church used by the Tueni family are adjacent to the March 8-Aoun ongoing demonstrations and sit-ins, making for an irresistible target for trouble-makers. Clashes between the two sides appear inevitable, given the proximity. While less likely given greater physical distance between the two events, a dress rehearsal for the clashes could occur as early as Sunday, when an all-day seminar on press freedom sponsored by al-Nahar in Tueni's memory will take place simultaneously with another large March 8-Aoun demonstration. Adding to the tension is the requirement that Siniora announce the Tuesday cabinet session 48 hours in advance -- i.e., on Sunday, when March 8-Aoun ready-to-deploy demonstrators will presumably be in place in large numbers near the Grand Serail headquarters of the Prime Minister. We expect that the actual decision as to whether to announce the cabinet meeting will not be made until the last minute, given changing circumstances. End summary.

HOW TO PASS THE TRIBUNAL, WHEN THE CABINET IS PHYSICALLY OBSTRUCTED

12. (S) In separate meetings with the Ambassador on December 6, Marwan Hamadeh, Mohamed Chatah, and Ghattas Khoury revealed that Prime Minister Siniora plans -- at least at this point -- to convene the cabinet for an official meeting on Tuesday, December 12, to approve the Special Tribunal for Lebanon and authorize GOL signatures on the documents. While the 15-day constitutional waiting period to allow Emile Lahoud to act expired some time ago (as the cabinet passed the tribunal on its first reading on November 11, the meeting that provoked the Shia walk-out), Siniora and his advisors were worried how to gather the cabinet in its (temporary) official meeting place in downtown Beirut: they feared that the March 8-Aoun demonstrators, with their ongoing sit-in

only a couple of blocks from the cabinet venue, would either prevent the cabinet from meeting, storm the building once the ministers gathered, or trap the cabinet in an uncomfortable and cramped building indefinitely, to force Siniora's resignation. (Given Lebanon's annoyingly absurd complicated confessional sensitivities, Lebanon's cabinet cannot meet officially at the Grand Serail headquarters of the PM, considered a "Sunni" institution. Nor can it meet officially at the Baabda Presidential Palace, a "Christian" location. With the official cabinet hall near the Museum deemed a security risk, the Siniora cabinet for a period rotated meetings between the Serail and Baabda, which all accepted as providing the needed confessional balance. Later, the cabinet acquired for its official meetings temporary space in what passes for a confessionally-neutral building downtown.)

ENLISTING HELP FROM A "MARTYR"
TO PASS THE TRIBUNAL

¶3. (S) So March 14 leaders, "eager to pass the tribunal before another one of us gets killed" (quoting Hamadeh), decided to overcome the problem of physical movement by scheduling the cabinet meeting to coincide with a very sensitive date -- the first anniversary of the murder of MP and newspaper publisher Gibran Tueni. A large number of March 14 supporters will gather for a commemorative mass for Tueni at 5 p.m. on December 12 at St. George's Orthodox Cathedral in Parliament Square, downtown Beirut. St. George's (not to be confused with St. George's Maronite Cathedral nearby, the site of Pierre Gemayel's funeral) is only two blocks from Foch Street, where the "Foch Street gang" (as Michel Aoun now calls the cabinet he refuses to recognize, a less elegant name in our view the "Feltman government" description preferred by Hizballah) holds its

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cabinet sessions. March 14 leaders propose to hold the cabinet meeting either immediately before or immediately after the Tueni memorial mass, so that the March 14 supporters will serve as human shields to protect the ministers and allow them to arrive and depart in safety.

MARCH 8-AOUN DEMONSTRATIONS
ONLY STEPS AWAY FROM TUENI MASS

¶4. (S) The problem is that Parliament Square and St. George's, while two blocks from the Foch Street cabinet hall, are only one block from Riad Solh Square, the site of the ongoing March 8-Aoun demonstrations. While no one knows what the size of the March 8-Aoun crowds will be on December 12, there is a very real danger that the two groups will come into contact and clash in central Beirut. The target is almost too tempting for trouble-makers from either side, as minor clashes could quickly spin out of control. Khoury acknowledged that this could be the event that ignites the long-feared physical attack on the Beirut Central District's glittering Solidere development (that has already been devastated commercially by the March 8-Aoun protests). While hoping that the centerpiece of Rafiq Hariri's Beirut reconstruction project survives physically unscathed, Khoury asked, "what choice do we have? We are not going to drop the tribunal. How else is the cabinet going to meet?"

ANNOUNCEMENT ON SUNDAY
COULD PROVOKE TROUBLE

¶5. (S) Under Lebanon's constitutional rules, the Prime Minister has to announce cabinet meetings and the agenda in advance, traditionally 48 hours. Thus Siniora is required to announce the cabinet meeting on Sunday. This in itself could provoke initial troubles, as those determined to derail the tribunal might be provoked into action. "These will be the most dangerous two days for all of us," Hamadeh noted; "none

of us should move." Chatah acknowledged that Siniora is very much aware that March 8-Aoun forces, who have declared his cabinet illegal, will try to use the mere announcement of the cabinet meeting to incite anger against Siniora.

¶6. (S) As chance would have it in this overheated and worrying atmosphere, Hizballah and Aoun forces have already announced plans for a massive rally on Sunday in downtown Beirut, meaning that a ready-to-deploy mob will be instantly available to make trouble, should March 8-Aoun leaders call for it. Siniora's announcement of a cabinet meeting on the tribunal will undoubtedly be seen as a provocation. In fact, there could be a dress rehearsal of sorts for clashing opposing demonstrations on Sunday. Beginning Sunday morning, al-Nahar newspaper will sponsor an all-day press freedom seminar at the BIEL exhibition area adjacent to downtown. The March 8-Aoun rally is scheduled for 3 p.m. This means that, by mid-afternoon on Sunday, one could have pro- and anti-government forces both out downtown (albeit at some physical distance -- unlike the cheek-and-jowl proximity expected for Tuesday, the two groups would have to make a conscious decision to brush up against one another on Sunday). The Ambassador and PAO -- who will unlikely be able to attend the official memorial mass from Tueni for reasons noted above -- are scheduled, security conditions permitting, to represent the USG at the Tueni press freedom seminar opening session. The opening session will conclude hours before the March 8-Aoun demonstrators are expected to gather.

COMMENT

¶7. (S) We emphasize that it is too early to predict whether or not Siniora will, in the end, follow current plans to call for a cabinet meeting for Tuesday or, even if he does, actually be able to pull it off two long and dangerous days later. With March 8-Aoun trying to keep March 14 and the GOL off balance, much could happen between now and Sunday that might change Siniora's cost-benefit analysis. We will report any updates. Moreover, while Siniora seems determined to move ahead on the tribunal now, one wonders whether he can really muster 16 ministers (out of the 17 remaining) to venture into the Beirut Central District for an official cabinet meeting that will be seen as a provocation by people camped out only steps away and determined to topple the cabinet. Failing to muster a cabinet quorum would be an enormous blow to Siniora's legitimacy. Between now and

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Sunday, we expect an intense period of message deliveries (SMS, e-mail, fax, messenger boys) between March 14 leaders who are so fearful for their lives that they have trouble getting together physically to make plans. If Siniora does manage despite the odds to pull off the cabinet meeting and approve the tribunal, Chatah told us that he will immediately submit the documents to the parliament for ratification.

FELTMAN